

Hungry Ghosts

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Hungry Ghosts, a group show presented at The Douglas Hyde Gallery (10 June-25 July, 1998) comprising the work of Nobuyoshi Araki, John Currin, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Rineke Dijkstra, Marlene Dumas, Keith Edmier, Karen Kilimnik, Sarah Lucas, Hiroshi Sugimoto. All of the work shown has been widely exhibited internationally.

Broadly the work negotiates varying strands of art practices read through portraiture, documentary, cinema and popular culture, and employs various media including painting, photography, drawing and sculpture. In this instance the works' configuration is framed through the title of the show HUNGRY GHOSTS, a term from Buddhism referring to insatiable desire, perpetual hunger, represented in Buddhist imagery by a big belly and a small neck. Hungry Ghosts as a framing device situates the distinct 'spiritual and philosophical ethos' of The Douglas Hyde Gallery under its director John Hutchinson.

In the gallery handout, Hutchinson writes:

"Extreme forms of desire are not especially interesting, because those who are overwhelmed by them become almost inhuman. Raw voracity is hellish, and it demands fulfilment. In contrast, the people in Hungry Ghosts seem to be in a state of transition, halfway between one world and the other. In a certain sense they are all weightless."¹

Hungry Ghosts is populated by John Currin's 'realism in drag' type Miss Fenwick, 1997, Dumas' Naomi Campbell and Princess Diana, Great Britain, 1997, the 'rent boys' of Philip-Lorca diCorcia's 'Hollywood' series, Rineke Dijkstra's scrawny adolescents from the 'Beach' series, Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26, 1992 and four of Dijkstra's Matadors. There are also Araki's hotel porno people, Tokyo Cube (53-58) and Kilimnik's Hello magazine types such as Death in America, Plaza Hotel, 1964, 1989, Sarah Lucas' Bunny—gets snookered no.9, 1997, and Keith Edmier's sculpted from television African famine victims. A motley crew.

Sugimoto's photographic image Stadium Drive in, Orange County, 1993, stands alone as the only image unpopulated and yet the image is overcrowded by a populace just beyond the threshold of visibility. The time lapse process by which the image is produced (exposed for the length of the projected image on the screen) acts as a means of evacuating the image (on screen) and foregrounding what is by necessity usually absent, that is, the screen. This indeterminate presence/absence in-betweenness disrupts the central focus making a blank non-space at the centre exploding the punctum to the edges of the frame and the mise en scene of both the actual space of spectatorship represented in the image and the framing of film as 'product'. The Stadiums situation in Orange County is spatially relevant, within driving distance of Hollywood but closer to Disney.

The placing of Sugimoto's work at the beginning of the exhibition and the foregrounding of 'framing' as an activity enables a reading of the rest of the work and the show as a whole, through the varying topographies of evacuation, the wider world of electro-visual

culture and the possible spectres this embodies. The Buddhist framing of Hungry Ghosts as an exhibition, frames the work through a theological discourse on "...the condition of longing, of unfulfilled desire"² one that in a wider art context flows easily enough with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. This easily aligned mutual gratification has the potential to act as a full stop though, creating an artificial closure to the plethora of readings possible. The stillness of this if you like, the ISness of it all, and the stasis it has the potential to offer, constructs an uncomplicated doxa in the way the work is presented for interpretation. Does this in some way close off discussion of how desire is constituted and mediated?

"The priest carried out the first sacrifice, named castration, and all the men and women of the north lined up behind him, crying in cadence, 'Lack, lack, it's the common law'.³

Thinking through the work of diCorcia's 'rent boys', Brent Booth; 21 years old; Des Minew, Iowa; \$30 and Edward Earle Windsor; 20 years old; Atlanta, Georgia; \$30 for example, what is marginalised in reading these images through desire (with a capital D) is the tenuous strands that infiltrate these spaces. It is not that desire should be excluded from the discussion around these images (or even that it could be excluded).

Hutchinson referring to the 'people' in Hungry Ghosts writes "...others are drained, as though they have been exhausted by a fruitless quest for an impossible dream."⁴ This is not written specifically in relation to diCorcia's images, I have chosen it as apt because it fits well with the typical 'otherside' negotiation of Hollywood. However reading these characters through this trajectory chooses to ignore information about the production of the images, that they are paid performances, albeit underpaid. The images are taken in a location where rent boys hang out, however there is an ambiguity as to whether they are rent boys, but either/or, they are performing being rent boys, for diCorcia's camera. It is this ambiguity in the set-up involved in their production, that directs attention towards the viewing expectation (desire again). The performative artificial aspect of the images maps an ambivalence to the authority of documentary and opens up the interpretative process to include the detritus of the image. Is this guy who is playing the part of the 'rent boy', paid by diCorcia, drinking Pepsi, because, a) it was part of diCorcia's compositional strategy or b) it was a happy accident? Less fixated on the potential of this image to proffer information on the ontological spaces occupied by the position 'rent boy'—what interests me is how the banal functions as an interactive process between the artwork and the viewer. Does he watch the same ads for Pepsi as me? Is he part of the 'Pepsi generation'?

Approaching Keith Edmier's 'Ethiopian Baby and Young Woman, 1984-5', two figurative sculptures in pigmented vinyl, mindful of, as Dick Hebdige writes that "...we all live these days in the airwaves as well as on the ground in three dimensional neighbourhoods"⁵ Edmier's figures are obsessively 'real' based on televisual imagery of Ethiopian famine victims. As 'copies' from the television they are 'copies' from a complex network of codes circulating through global telecommunication network's processing of, for example, Africa, the 'catastrophe', natural disaster etc. With this in mind is the term 'copy' appropriate? Is there an authority of resemblance in Edmier's Ethiopian Baby and Young woman? Reference is deferred in these sculptures of images, images which can be read as representations of particular codes. With Edmier's sculpture are we in the space of simulacrum "...as images without resemblance" although producing "...an effect of resemblance"⁶ And, if this is so how are we to negotiate Hutchinson's desire to read this work as accessing 'people'. This focus on the repre-

sentations in the show Hungry Ghosts as in some way directly accessing 'people' (the authority of resemblance) allows descriptions which evacuates the mediation process. Writing that "...some are the objects of love or longing, who have suffered from the weight of their burden ...a few have become empty so they can move, unresisting, with the flow of desire", allows an over simplification in how viewers might want to engage with this work.⁷ Even within the terms of Hutchinson's own reference, in accepting these representations as somehow directly relating to an accepted reality do we want to read Ethiopian Woman and Child as Hungry Ghosts.⁸ To do this surely we displace the political spectres of 'globalisation'.

The figure of the ghost is situated in recent cultural theory as offering political significance suggesting as Allen Meek writes "...a paradigmatic shift in cultural studies where the poststructuralist death of the subject encounters both the collapse of Soviet communism and the 'revolution' in global telecommunications".⁹ In his mapping of 'spectral critique' he cites Derrida's politics "...of memory, of inheritance and of generations",¹⁰ Meek's thesis is that a spectral critique would "...open global tele-capitalism to the enigmas of visibility that call us back to our fundamental social and political responsibilities: to the un- and under-employed ...to non-citizens and to all those whose civil liberties are diminished or annihilated in the New World Order".¹¹

John Hutchinson writes: "When we give up hope and perch on the edge of existence, without a steady foothold, emptiness becomes palpable. If we're lucky, we may then begin to see life clearly, with compassion."¹²

Colliding Meek (M) and Hutchinson (H) in order to read (H) "the edge of existence" as the (M) "under-employed or the non-citizen" and (M) "annihilation of civil liberties" as (H) "without a steady foothold", Hungry Ghost's focusing on (H) "the condition of longing, of unfulfilled desire" rather than (M) "social and political responsibilities" begs the question if (H) "compassion" is to be based on (H) "luck" are we in danger of being haunted by what Jameson has referred to as "sheer class resentment".¹³

Notes

- 1 John Hutchinson, Hungry Ghosts Gallery Hand out, The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, 1998.
- 2 ibid
- 3 Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, trans Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p154.
- 4 John Hutchinson, op cit.
- 5 Dick Hebdige in *Towards A Theory of The Image* (Ed) Jon Thompson, Maastricht, Jan Van Eyck Akadmie, 1996, p.140.
- 6 Gilles Deleuze, *Plato and the Simulacrum*, trans. by Rosalind Krauss, October No. 27, Winter 1984, pp 46-56.
- 7 John Hutchinson, op cit.
- 8 Angelina Morrison also remarked on this disparity while commenting on the visual similarity to Buddhist images of Hungry Ghosts ie the big belly and thin neck (Angelina Morrison, Gallery Talk, 22 July 1998.) In a specifically Irish context the aesthetic codes of Ethiopian Woman and Child have a certain similarity to the 'Irish famine monument' across from the AIB International Banking Centre in Dublin.
- 9 Allen Meek, *Guides to the Electropolis: Toward a Spectral Critique of the Media in Postmodern Culture* v.7 n.1 September, 1996.
- 10 Derrida, Jacques, *Spectres of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf. Intro. Bernd Magnus & Stephen Cullenberg. London, New York: Routledge, 1994. London, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. xix.
- 11 Allen Meek, op cit.
- 12 John Hutchinson, op cit.
- 13 Frederic Jameson, *Marx's Purloined Letter*, *New Left Review*, No 209 Jan/Feb 1995, p. 86.

PHILIP-LORCA
DI-CORCIA:
Hollywood series

